

Tribute by Ruth Padilla DeBorst
General Secretary, Latin American Theological Fellowship
Langham Scholar

The wind raged, threatening to untether the tent. Inside, around a dim light, we listened intently to our guest: “I invite you to be touched by God’s tenderness,” he said. “God yearns to gather, protect and care for us as does a mother hen”.

That was February 1981, when the world-famous leader John Stott camped with us in the Patagonia region of Argentina, and became the special uncle who opened our eyes to the wondrous beauty both of God’s creation and of God’s Word. I had met Uncle John -- or “Tío Juan” as he is known in the Spanish-speaking world -- four years before. Having visited several Latin American countries with my father, Rene Padilla -- and having tried (unsuccessfully!) to make a bird-watcher out of him --, John came to lead a series of pastoral seminars in Buenos Aires under the auspices of the Latin American Theological Fellowship. With characteristic clarity and depth, John opened the Word, watered the seeds of theological zeal planted by my parents, and nurtured my excitement about the relevance of Scripture to every-day life. On a later occasion, he made me feel like the most accomplished translator in the world when I facilitated his communication with IFES staff in Quito, Ecuador, in 1985. “Ruthie,” he endearingly took to calling me, as only my closest family did; and his embrace stretched across the oceans through words of loving encouragement upon my late first husband’s death in 1997.

Like thousands of Latin American Christians, my understanding of the gospel, my submission to Christ’s lordship, my attitude toward Scripture, and my sense of vocation, are all marked by Tío Juan’s life, teaching and writing.

In a world in which leaders –even Christian leaders—often puff up, expect praise, privilege and unquestioning allegiance, and offer little more than a caricature of discipleship, John’s simplicity offers proof and inspiration that another model is possible: one marked by humility, warm-hearted friendship, persevering prayer, unmovable submission to the authority of Scripture, and an inescapable commitment to building bridges between the Word and the world. Although his nationality, credentials and accomplishments could easily have bred self-confidence and unwillingness to change, John chose vulnerable engagement with his Latin American friends, and allowed their biblical and missional perspectives, born in contexts of poverty and injustice, to stretch and challenge his own.

If Tío Juan’s life affected many of us who were privileged to meet him personally, thousands more have been impacted by his clear and relevant exposition of Scripture. Ediciones Certeza Unida, the publishing house of the IFES’ Spanish-speaking student movements, which I am honored to direct, has expanded the reach of his teaching with titles such as *Basic Christianity*, the *Cross of Christ*, his New Testament Commentaries, and his last book, the *Radical Christian*. Thanks also to John’s vision and self-sacrificial commitment to the values of God’s reign, and to the

faithful stewardship of Chris Wright and his team in Langham Partnership International, the seeds of radical discipleship are being sown and watered in the Latino world by schools of biblical preachers, by biblical scholars, and by evangelical writers. Soon we will see the launch of the *Comentario Bíblico Contemporáneo*, a one-volume commentary on every book of the Bible plus thematic articles, written and produced in its entirety by Latin American authors and editors. Sponsored by Langham Partnership, this also will be tangible evidence of John Stott's legacy in Latin America and one more reason why Latin American Christians give thanks to God for Tío Juan.

Today many social, political, economic, ecological, and even religious winds rage across our world. They threaten the full and abundant life that is God's desire for children, women and men, for John's beloved teachers, the birds, and for the entire created order. May God's Spirit so move in us that the memory, the model and the legacy of Tío Juan may continue to inspire us. May we dig ever deeper into the nourishing soil of God's Word so that we may soar like John's beloved eagles and live as ever more faithful followers of Jesus in God's World!

Ruth Padilla DeBorst